

Inconvenient solidarity: Religion professors support a hotel boycott

by [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [November 14, 2012](#) issue



Pickers call for better working conditions at the Grand Hyatt in San Francisco. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Anne Roth](#).

On the weekend before Thanksgiving, thousands of religion scholars will gather for a joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature in a city that will provide more than enough material for moral reflection. By choosing to meet in Chicago, these scholars step into a complex moral landscape of interwoven labor disputes and economic stress that will require them to make hard decisions—beginning with where to lay their heads.

Many events of the AAR-SBL meeting would have been scheduled at the Hyatt Regency McCormick Place, conveniently located next to the city’s convention center. But the Hyatt hotel chain is the object of a national boycott in which its unionized workers have taken the drastic step of asking people not to stay, meet or eat at the establishments that employ them.

This sets up what seems like the beginning of a bad joke: “An ethicist, a preacher and a theologian walk into a hotel bar that is being boycotted by its own workers.”

The issue is no joke to the housekeepers who clean high-end hotel rooms which have increasingly elaborate luxury bedding. The heavy duvets and extra pillows that give customers a good night’s sleep cause back problems for the housekeepers, who claim that they are expected to work faster and harder. They are hoping that their

boycott will compel the Chicago-based Hyatt Corporation to negotiate a fair contract, stop subcontracting jobs and allow workers at nonunion Hyatt hotels a fair process for trying to organize a union.

The issue of subcontracting may have some resonance for the academics who will be coming to Chicago. Many aspiring teachers will interview for the small number of jobs in a field in which the employers—colleges and universities—are increasingly outsourcing academic positions by using part-time teachers. The job seekers may already be teaching as adjuncts, one course here and another there, for wages that could never support a single person, let alone a family.

The scholars will not be able to miss the fact that the Hyatt workers' complaints have biblical themes: the exploitation of immigrants, the abuse of housekeepers, the callousness of the rich toward the poor who serve, cook and clean for them. It is no wonder that Interfaith Worker Justice and Arise Chicago, whose boards I have served on, have made organizing religious support for the Hyatt workers a priority.

My connection to the hotel workers is personal as well, in that I am married to an organizer with UniteHere! which represents the Hyatt workers. I know many of the hotel workers personally, and I have heard their stories firsthand. I recall one well-publicized incident in Chicago last summer, when Hyatt management turned heat lamps on striking workers during a 100-degree heat wave. This story and others like it have contributed to a national multifaith effort to see the Hyatt workers treated better.

An editorial in the *Jewish Daily Forward* summer before last, titled "Keeping It Kosher," posed these questions: "Is a hotel no longer to be considered kosher because of the way it treats its housekeepers? Is a restaurant or a factory *treyf* [nonkosher] because of how it treats its workers?"

The piece quoted a clergy report on the Hyatt spelling out one answer from Jewish leaders that will have resonance with the scholars meeting in Chicago: "We pledge to treat the Hyatt as *lo kasher*/not kosher for events and celebrations until it treats its workers with justice."

But the Hyatt is not the only source of labor tension in Chicago. Known as a union town, the city was the scene of a recent seven-day public school teachers' strike that captured national attention. The Chicago Teachers Union was at war with Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel, who allied himself with a school board made up

of persons from the corporate world bent on school reform who see the teachers union as a large part of the city's education problem. One of those school board members is real estate billionaire Penny Pritzker, whose family runs the Hyatt Corporation.

At a Labor Day rally for the teachers union, Pritzker's name was found on almost as many protest signs as the mayor's. One sign called upon the mayor and Pritzker to "Give it back," referring to the \$5.4 million in financing given by the city to a new Hyatt hotel in the Hyde Park neighborhood. That was money that protesting teachers felt would have been better spent at underresourced Hyde Park public schools.

Hyde Park, the location of the University of Chicago, offers some of the best and worst education in the city. While its public schools struggle, the private University of Chicago Lab School has educated the children of elite parents, including those of Mayor Emanuel, Penny Pritzker and President Obama. The public school teachers have returned to work, but they do so in a school system that has regressed to a pre-*Plessy v. Ferguson* era of separate-but-unequal.

Religious scholars concerned about Hyatt's labor conflict raised the issue with the boards of the AAR and SBL this summer. A massive letter-writing campaign to board members ensued, as scholars from diverse religious and ethical perspectives called on their professional organizations to recognize the boycott.

Board members responded to the many letters and met to discuss the ethical implications of their gathering. The AAR and SBL issued a statement explaining that together they would alert their members to the problem, give them the opportunity to stay elsewhere, move the daycare center out of the Hyatt and offer rooms in a nonboycotted hotel or in the convention center for employment interviews.

Despite the fact that Hyatt operates the only hotel within walking distance of the McCormick Place convention center, the AAR shifted its base of operations from the Hyatt to the Hilton, which is 1.9 miles from the convention center. The AAR's VIPs and staff will now be housed there.

Citing budget concerns, the SBL has not taken this last step; staff and board members remain housed in complimentary rooms at the Hyatt. While the SBL has moved all program sessions out of the Hyatt, a few SBL committee meetings are still booked there, including the former presidents forum and the meeting of the finance

committee. It is up to each committee member whether or not to attend.

So who will still be at the Hyatt? Anyone who chooses to stay there. AAR and SBL can decide only where to hold their own events and alert members to the boycott. The attendees and educational institutions will still have to make their own decisions.

Job applicants will find out how hiring institutions have responded to the AAR and SBL's joint statement on the boycott. Underemployed and in debt after years of training, these Ph.D.s know something about how elusive job security is in the current economy. In their own search for a teaching job, will they break a boycott and step into a Hyatt hotel to try to get one?

Those issues may be addressed at the convention itself. A committee has planned an additional plenary session to consider the ways in which academic and religious communities have related to labor movements.

Already, members of both professional groups are looking past this convention to future gatherings in the hope that another conflict like this can be avoided. Utilizing the AAR's member-authored resolution process, some scholars are asking members to sign a resolution declaring that the AAR will not patronize a hotel or conference center that is in the midst of a boycott, strike, lockout, picketing or other labor dispute and that the AAR will add language to all future contracts that allows them to get out of a contract without paying a penalty fee if a labor dispute arises (the petition is available at aarpetition.org).

That resolution will be voted on at the AAR annual board meeting on November 18 and needs a simple majority to pass. Even if it passes, it will not resolve the issue. The AAR and the SBL have signed joint contracts with hotels around the country for upcoming joint meetings. If one organization passes a resolution on labor issues and the other does not adopt the same policy, complications will arise for both.

In these muddy waters one thing is clear: the two organizations, with different cultures and financial means, will be forced to work closely together on labor issues, either under pressure from their members or in order to avoid financial penalties in already signed contracts.

A group of Sabbath-observing Jewish scholars has been wrestling with the implications of staying at hotels miles away from the convention center. Being

unable to take the shuttle bus from the downtown hotels to the convention center on Saturday, November 17, and believing that the commandment to observe the Sabbath was the first workers' rights law, they plan to walk the nearly two miles that day as a sign of their support of the workers. In another act of solidarity, a multifaith group of colleagues is planning to join the trek to the convention center so that the Sabbath-observing scholars will not walk alone.

This convergence is much like that which the Hyatt workers are seeking with the surrounding community. By asking others to experience inconvenience or hardship, the Hyatt workers are asking the community to bear their struggles with them, so that they will not be alone.

There are all kinds of reasons to ignore a boycott, but most of them begin with a concern with the self: "I do not want to be inconvenienced. I do not want to lose money. I do not want to put myself out in any way. My own lofty project matters more than the concerns of the housekeepers who make my bed."

The religious scholars who will march the two miles on the Sabbath will be living with the inconvenience and the cost, understanding that it is not all about them. They will also, no doubt, have to live with those who criticize their position. Sounds to me like a pretty good illustration of the life of faith.